Bush Officials Defend Environmental Positions In Earth Day Debates
Whitman, Norton Play Down Drilling Options

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President Bush's beleaguered environment officials spent Earth Day yesterday putting their greenest feet forward, with Environmental Protection Agency chief Christine Todd Whitman saying an administration task force would not insist on drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton playing down a controversial proposal to build new oil rigs off Florida.

But Democratic Party leaders -- sensing they had found the administration's Achilles' heel in Bush's recent proposals to bail out of a global warming treaty, suspend new standards for arsenic in drinking water and allow mining and drilling in national monuments -- kept up the pressure.

Speaking on CBS's "Face the Nation" yesterday, Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) threatened to subpoena documents that the EPA used to justify its recent rescinding of Clinton administration environmental initiatives. Separately, Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) criticized Bush's budget for its cutbacks on energy conservation and alternative fuel programs.

The exchanges capped a week-long effort by Bush administration officials to reverse what Norton yesterday portrayed as a failure "to get our message across" -- an environmental message that she contended was not all that different from the last administration's.

Norton said on ABC's "This Week" that Clinton administration interior secretary Bruce Babbitt had proposed temporary limitations on the Endangered Species Act similar to those she is being criticized for backing. And she said that many of Clinton's executive orders creating new national monuments had allowed for the continuation of oil and gas development within those monuments, yet the Bush administration was now taking the blame for floating plans to pursue those energy sources.

Similarly, Norton said, the proposal to drill for oil in the Gulf of Mexico at least 100 miles off the coast of Florida "has been on the table for quite a while" and has already been "approved by Congress."

"We are just now in the process of going through the environmental analysis, and that is what Florida is concerned about," Norton said. When that analysis is complete, she said, "we will still have the opportunity to work with Florida and to evaluate the proposal."

Florida's Sen. Bob Graham (D) disputed Norton's assessment that Congress was sanguine about offshore drilling. Asked on CNN's "Late Edition" whether it was all right with him, he replied: "No, it's not. And it's not okay with Congress, which has for the last 20 years established a moratorium against drilling off the coast of Florida." The moratorium prevents drilling out to 100 miles.

Joining Norton on "This Week," Kerry lambasted the Bush administration for risking ecological destruction for relatively small sources of energy, which could as easily be left untapped if appropriate conservation measures were taken.

"What's sad about the Bush approach to the environment is they have cut, in their energy budget, some of those programs most important to providing alternatives to drilling in Alaska," Kerry said. "The renewable program, for instance, [and] the research and development for alternative fuels."

Speaking on "Face the Nation," Whitman gave the strongest assurance yet that the administration would not push hard for permission to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge -- a political retreat that many White House watchers had predicted given the apparent lack of supportive votes in Congress and threats of a Democratic filibuster.

Whitman, who sits on Vice President Cheney's energy task force, which is due to present recommendations next month, would not confirm a report in the current issue of Time magazine that the administration has dropped its plan to drill in the refuge. But she said the task force will not explicitly endorse it.

"As far as our report goes, we didn't specifically say, 'You must drill in ANWR,' " Whitman said. "We didn't recommend that to the president."

Separately, however, Norton said the administration does not consider the Arctic option to be dead. She told "Late Edition" that senior Bush adviser Karl Rove told her early yesterday that "he still believes that it is something that we should push forward with."

Lieberman said it had been more than a month since he had requested from Whitman and other agency heads documents explaining why the administration was rescinding or blocking environmental regulations.

"Thus far, I have not received anything but a runaround from EPA and the other agencies," Lieberman said.

Lieberman, who is the ranking Democrat on the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, and a member of the Environment and Public Works Committee, said: "I don't want to have a confrontation with EPA. But if we don't get that information soon, I'm going to ask my fellow committee members to subpoena that information from the agency. I think it's that important."

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